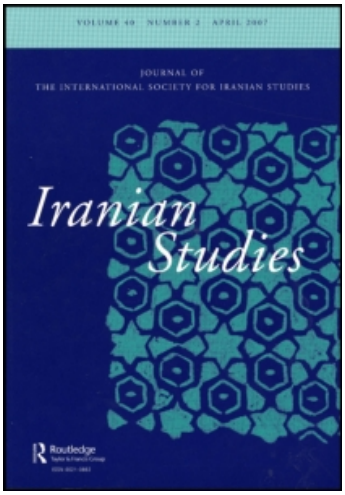

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The *Shahnama*: Between the Samanids and the Ghaznavids

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The *Shahnama*: Between the Samanids and the Ghaznavids

The paper reconsiders the apocryphal stories regarding the Shahnama*'s initial reception to propose that it was only after long narrative poems gained currency that the* Shahnama *was recognized as a masterpiece. The paper analyzes the structure and themes of several histories written before and during the Samanid period and compares them with the* Shahnama *and the content of histories and epics produced immediately afterwards, to argue that the initial reception of the* Shahnama *did not depend on Sultan Mahmud Ghazni alone. It further argues that the* Shahnama*'s aim, content, and execution differed from the histories and poetry produced in the decades immediately preceding and succeeding it, which would account for the lag in its acceptance and popularity. This led later biographers to superimpose their regret over Firdausi's treatment onto Sultan Mahmud Ghazni, who by their accounts denied him the fame and glory he deserved in his lifetime.*

In the introduction to his historical-heroic epic, the *Shahnama*, Firdausi (d. *c*. 1020 AD) pointedly informs us that he suffered for thirty years in order to bring Iranians to life by means of Persian. According to the apocryphal stories that sprang up soon after the *Shahnama* had been completed, however, Sultan Mahmud Ghazni (d. 1030 AD), to whom the epic was dedicated and submitted, initially rejected Firdausi's masterpiece only to appreciate it just before the poet passed away.

The stories that deal with the Sultan and his cool reception of the *Shahnama* are replete with literary mechanisms that reveal their fictive natures and the intentions of their authors—to reconcile their admiration for the epic with its initial rejection. Furthermore, these stories may be divided into two categories: those that deal with Firdausi's life after the cool reception of his masterpiece and those that delve into Mahmud's personal circumstances. The most famous of the former describes Firdausi's resignation and deep-seated disappointment at the Sultan's treatment: After Firdausi received silver dirhams instead of gold he went to a bath house, where he squandered it all, returned home, and died on his estate. Later, as his funeral procession entered the back gate of the city,

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the promised reward entered through the front on the backs of camels sent by the remorseful Sultan.[1] Other stories of this type depict Firdausi traveling the Eastern Islamic lands, seeking shelter with rival lords, having incurred the Sultan's wrath for dispersing the silver dirhams or for composing a satire against him.[2] And a few go still further to depict a disappointed Firdausi renouncing his interest in Iran's pre-Islamic past and composing a romantic epic on Joseph and Potiphar's wife (*Yusuf va Zulaikha*).[3]

During the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, renewed interest in Iran's pre-Islamic past led many to Firdausi's *Shahnama* for its portrayal of pre-Islamic Iranian kings and Iranian ideals of kingship. Scholars, who were most interested in why the *Shahnama* was not initially received well, focused less on the events after Mahmud's rejection of the epic and turned their attention to Mahmud and his court. They re-examined and reaffirmed the most popular interpretations dating back to the twelfth and thirteenth centuries: Mahmud's Turkish origins; his slave origins; his orthodox Sunni views poised against Firdausi's possible Shi'i sympathies; poetic competition; and courtly intrigue. The latter interpretations hold the most important figures of the Ghaznavid courts and their machinations culpable, even though the *Shahnama* is replete with praises to Mahmud and Persian literature continued to flourish under him.[4]

However, the initial reception and later acceptance of the *Shahnama* may not have depended on the Sultan alone. In spite of the attempts to understand Mahmud's reception of the *Shahnama*, the epic is rarely studied in the context of the works of history and poetry that preceded and succeeded it.[5] The present paper attempts to reconsider the issue by tracing some of the connections between the Samanids' and Mahmud's specific interests in Persian literature and history with the texts that they commissioned and which were produced before and after them, to propose that it was not until *manẓumas* (long narrative poems) had gained currency that the *Shahnama* began to receive the attention it deserved.

[1]Modern scholarship has determined that Firdausi himself did not travel to Mahmud's court to present his work to the sultan personally and that Mahmud did not receive the *Shahnama* well. Refer to A. Shapur Shahbazi, *Ferdowsī: A Critical Biography* (Costa Mesa, CA, 1991), 91–93. For the latter point, see Dick Davis, *Epic and Sedition: The Case of Ferdowsi's Shahnameh* (Fayetteville, 1992; repr. Washington DC, 2006), 179.

[2]Shahbazi, *Ferdowsī*, 94–96.

[3]See Hermann Ethé, *Yúsuf and Zalîkhâ by Firdausî of Tús* (Oxford, 1908); the work has since been recognized as being written by a later poet; see Firuza Abdullaeva and Charles Melville, *The Persian Book of Kings. Ibrahim Sultan's Shahnama* (Oxford, 2008), 15.

[4]According to Shahbazi, the satire against Mahmud, which it is believed to have been inserted into the *Shahnama* by Firdausi after Mahmud's cool reception of it, is apocryphal. See Shahbazi, *Ferdowsī*, 101.

[5]Recent studies of the *Shahnama* refer to the well-known fact of Mahmud's interest in Persian history, literature, and culture, without making a connection between such specific interests and the kinds of histories being produced before and during his reign. See Shahbazi, *Ferdowsī*; Dick Davis, *Epic and Sedition*; and Kumiko Yamamoto, *The Oral Background of Persian Epics: Storytelling and Poetry* (Leiden, 2003).

Interest in Persian as a courtly language and as a vehicle for literature flowered under the Samanids (819–999 AD), who were the first truly autonomous Iranian dynasty to arise in the north-eastern Islamic regions after the Arab conquests. The Samanids patronized and fostered original works of Arabic and Persian poetry, history and philosophy, in addition to commissioning Persian translations of such works as the *Jami' al-Bayan 'an Ta'wil al-Qur'an* (or *Tafsir al-Tabari*) and *Ta'rikh al-Rusul wa'l-Muluk* by al-Tabari (838–923 AD), and the *Kalila wa Dimna*. The Samanid vizier Abu 'Ali Muhammad Bal'ami, who was personally responsible for the important task of translating Tabari's *Ta'rikh*, in actuality produced an adaptation that became the Samanid state-sanctioned history and the first Perso-Islamic history. However, in order to fully appreciate the significance of Bal'ami's *Tarikh* as the history of Iranians as Muslims and how the *Shahnama* differs from it, a few words on Tabari's *Ta'rikh* and its structure, themes, and preoccupations are first necessary.

Tabari's *Ta'rikh* is a monolithic universal history of the Muslim community that starts with the Creation and ends just before the author's own time. After its composition and until the present day, the *Ta'rikh* has been highly esteemed for the breadth of its subject matter and the author's perceived objectivity. As well as other histories written in the ninth century, it deals with various aspects of Iranian history to varying degrees and advanced several trends first set by the seminal history of Ibn Ishaq (d. *c*. 767), *Sirat al-Nabi*; the most important of which for the present discussion is a focus on genealogies.

The *Sira* promulgated the notion of a pan-(Arab) Muslim genealogy that allowed for equality among various Arab tribes,[6] redirected attention away from hereditary succession,[7] and provided a history for the Muslims that appropriated, subsumed, and rivaled the historical traditions of the Persians, Christians, Jews, and Indians, who had their own expansive histories.[8] The *Sira* accomplished this by reinforcing the belief that the Arabs were descendants of Abraham through Ishmael and by depicting Muhammad's ascension into heaven, where he is reported to have superseded all other Judeo-Christian prophets. Tabari's history and others similar to it responded to Ibn Ishaq's *Sira* thematically by including the histories of the conquered peoples, with a highlight on the genealogies of the Iranian mytho-historical ancient kings, who are equated with Qur'anic prophets.

This concern makes Tabari and other ninth- and tenth-century writers who treat Iranian history among the precursors[9] of the politically charged *shu'ubiyya*

[6]Tarif Khalidi, *Arabic Historical Thought in the Classical Period* (Cambridge, 1996), 34–51.

[7]See Ghazzal Dabiri, "The Origins and Development of Persian Epics" (Dissertation, UCLA, 2007), chapter 2.

[8]See R. Selheim, "Prophet, Chalif und Geschichte: Die Muhammed-Biographie des Ibn Ishāq", *Oriens*, 18–19 (1966): 33–91.

[9]I use the term "precursor" in the Borgesian sense of the term: "The fact is that each writer *creates* his precursors. His work modifies our conception of the past, as it will modify the future," though, unlike Borges I do not "purify it from every connotation of polemic or rivalry," but rather the

movement,[10] which was, as Mottahedeh puts it, a "controversy over the position of the Arabs and the non-Arab peoples, especially the Iranians, in Islam."[11] Though Tabari and his near contemporaries who dealt with Iranian genealogies and history cannot be counted among those in the *shu'ubiyya* movement proper, through their works these scholars engaged in a competitive dialogic debate by emulating the themes and structures and countering the arguments of their predecessors and rivals with which they disagreed or sought to better represent. If we consider that "the *shu'ûbîs* were often called the *ahl at-taswiyah*, 'the people [who advocate] equality,' and sometimes used the Qur'ânic phrase 'Truly the noblest among you before God is the most righteous,'" as well as the words Muhammad purportedly spoke, "you are all from Adam,"[12] then what the *Ta'rikh* and other histories provided was a platform whereby the Iranians could stand as religious and pious equals to the Arabs. This resulted in a shift in subject matter from pan-(Arab) Muslim histories to more inclusive histories of Muslims as a cosmopolitan people, among whom Iranians take center stage at crucial historical junctures.

In *The Location of Culture*, Homi Bhabha states, "it is the problem of how, in signifying the present, something comes to be repeated, relocated, and translated in the name of tradition, in the guise of a pastness that is not necessarily a faithful sign of historical memory but a strategy of representing authority in terms of the artifice of the archaic."[13] This statement may be reinterpreted for the concerns of the ninth- and tenth-century historians who looked to the ancient past of the Iranians, translated it and relocated it in their universal histories, which focused on the concerns of the origins and place of the Muslim community as a whole in relation to the world. Tabari reabsorbed the "archaic" past of the Iranians and used Ibn Ishaq's text (the latter lending authority to his own work) to posit, in part, the multicultural concerns of the Muslim community. By borrowing Ibn Ishaq's structure and appropriating his text, Tabari offers a response to the *Sira* by equating the Persians and the Arabs and thereby challenging Ibn Ishaq's silence on the role of Iranians in Islam. Moreover, by appropriating reports that equate Kayumars, the first mortal Iranian man, with Adam, Tabari gave the Iranians a competitive genealogy by which to establish

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reverse. See Jorge Luis Borges, "The Precursors of Kafka," in *Other Inquisitions: 1937–1952*, trans. Ruth L. C. Simms (Austin, 1975), 108.

[10]While other historians of this period also engaged in this controversy, it is well beyond the scope of this paper to address them, though future studies are needed for a clearer understanding of the movement from its inception.

[11]Roy Mottahedeh, "The Shu'ûbîyah Controversy and the Social History of Early Islamic Iran," *International Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, 7 (1976): 161. Though Mottahedeh states that the *shu'ubis* had no overt political motivations since they were not concerned with the creation of new governments (see p. 162), I view the "cultural-as-political-struggle," to borrow the phrase from Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London, 2008), 52.

[12]Mottahedeh, "The Shu'ûbîyah Controversy," 164.

[13]Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 52.

their equality with the Arabs, who placed a high value on genealogies and tribal lineages. In fact, one of the instances in which Tabari directly offers his opinion on a contested issue is in regard to the genealogies of the Iranians:

> Thus Hisham al-Kalbi told me that, "it has come down to us, but God knows best, that the first king, king of the Earth, [was] Ushhanq ibn 'Abir ibn Shalikh ibn Arfakhshad ibn Sam ibn Nuh." He said, "The Persians claim him and maintain that he came two hundred years after the death of Adam." He said, "Rather it has come down to us that this king came two hundred years after Nuh. The Persians imagine that he [came] two hundred years after Adam and they do not know what was before Nuh." That which Hisham said is baseless, since Hushhank (*sic*: for Hushang) the king, among those knowledgeable about genealogies about the Furs, is more famous than al-Hajjaj ibn Yusuf among the Muslims. *Every nation is more knowledgeable of its ancestors and its events and its genealogies than any other people. So in regard to any confused matter one should go to those who know*. Some Persian genealogists maintain that . . . Jayumart is Adam, peace be upon him.[14]

The competitive impetus is explicit in this passage: "that which Hisham said is baseless." Tabari appropriates the argument of a fellow scholar in order to refute it and to provide an alternate yet correct view of the past for the historical concerns of the Iranians in the context of Islam: "some Persian genealogists maintain that . . . Jayumart is Adam." The suggestion, by extension, is that the Arabs were not the only ones who considered themselves "a people" based on their knowledge of their ancestors and genealogies and, furthermore, that the Iranians who considered themselves "a people" by territorial affiliations[15] were also concerned with their genealogies.

As a translation of Tabari's *Ta'rikh*, Bal'ami's *Tarikh* embraced the historical tradition that understood Islam as subsuming the Judeo-Christian historical tradition and absorbing the Iranian one. Moreover, as an abridged adaptation of Tabari, Bal'ami's work shifted the emphasis from the community of Muslims to truly redefine Iranian history in its new Perso-Islamic context.[16]

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[14]Abu Ja'far Muhammad ibn Jarir al-Tabari, *Ta'rikh al-Rusul wa'l-Muluk*, ed. by J. Barth, Th. Nöldeke *et al.* (Leiden, 1879), 154–155 (emphasis added). See also *The History of al-Tabari. An Annotated Translation. Volume 1, General Introduction and From the Creation to the Flood*, trans. Franz Rosenthal (Albany, 1989), 326.

[15]Mottahedeh, "The Shu'ûbîyah Controversy," 167–172. In particular, refer to page 171 where Mottahedeh states, "The Qur'ân commentaries therefore give us a partial explanation of the common agreement according to which the Iranians considered themselves to be a people; for Iranian *Shu'ûbîs* (and probably for the majority of Iranians) the agreement was based in large part on ties to the land."

[16]I do agree with Andrew Peacock, however, that there is little to suggest that Bal'ami was writing to revitalize Iranian *nationalism* (an anachronism in and of itself). See A. C. S. Peacock, *Mediaeval Islamic Historiography and Political Legitimacy: Bal'amī's Tārīkhnāma* (London, 2007), 107.

Bal'ami's history achieved this by propagating the Iranian–Qur'anic genealogies explicitly presented in Tabari's *Ta'rikh*, while eliminating the lengthy *isnads* (chains of transmission) Tabari used, incorporating other sources from more recent histories on Iranian cities, added alternate and lengthier versions of stories regarding the ancient Iranian kings, and omitted certain passages.[17] These additions and omissions are significant, for they provide valuable insights into the thematic concerns of Bal'ami and his patrons, the most important of which for the present discussion is Iranian and Islamic ideals of kingship; ideals which, while fundamentally different, overlapped in certain areas.

The Iranian ideal of just kingship hails from Avestan hymns regarding the first men to supplicate deities for world dominion. They are granted this authority and bear the divine aura because they are Iranians *and* their purpose is to bring civilization to humanity and to populate the world. The most important of the first men-rulers is Yima (New Persian [NP]: Jamshid) whose reign is marked by the greatest advancements for which his subjects do not suffer hardship and do not die. On the contrary, the non-Iranian, whose cause is the annihilation of mankind (a particularly Ahrimanic preoccupation), is never granted world dominion and despite his best efforts to seize the divine aura, never possesses it. The Iranian rulers and their supplications are sharply juxtaposed against Azhi Dahaka (NP: Zahhak) whose egregious supplication to the good deities for world dominion to rid the world of mankind is peculiarly self-defeating. However, just as Yima is *the* paragon of good rule, he is also the first to lose the divine aura and world dominion because he commits the sin of claiming he is God.[18]

In contrast to the Iranian idea that kingship and the good of the people are inherently intertwined are the Islamic ideals of kingship, which stem from the early Muslim community's deep-seated mistrust of absolutist monarchies and anxieties over the caliphate's stewardship of the people as God's representative on Earth. This mistrust stems in part from the Qur'an, which posits the prophets and kings as diametrically opposed forces, whereby the prophets "are types of moral life,"[19] and kings are tyrannical. "At their [the kings'] head stands Fir'awn (Pharaoh) . . . [whose] struggle against Moses prefigures the entire history of the relationship between prophets and kings."[20] Kingship, however, in the absence of prophets (Muhammad having being the last), was recognized, albeit with hesitation and suspicion, as necessary for the benefit of the community.[21]

In the histories that sought to reconcile the Islamic narrative with that of the conquered peoples into a cohesive and inclusive universal history there is a

[17]For a full analysis on the complications of ascertaining Bal'ami's original text, see ibid., 52–59.
[18]See Dabiri, "The Origins," chapter 1 for an extended discussion on Yima/Jamshid's sin.
[19]Khalidi, *Arabic Historical Thought*, 9.
[20]Ibid., 10.
[21]Patricia Crone, *God's Rule. Government and Islam: Six Centuries of Medieval Islamic Political Thought* (New York, 2004), 4–32.

strained coexistence between the Iranian and Islamic ideas of kingship. Though Tabari quite frequently presents conflicting narratives of the same event, the two contrasting narratives regarding Jamshid's fall and Zahhak's rise to power represent, in actuality, two different mythoi, one of which would be adopted by Bal'ami and the other by Firdausi.[22] The most striking example of this disparate view on kingship, however, is between the representation of the ancient mythical Iranian kings and the Sasanian kings.

It has been noted that those ninth- and tenth-century writers who deal with pre-Islamic Iranian history offer a less than sentimental treatment of the last Sasanian kings in the conquest narratives.[23] Why do the historians who devote so much effort and space to incorporating Iranian kings into the Islamic narrative only cut them to the quick later? It is rather too simple to refer to the adage about older times being simpler and purer than contemporary times, or that these historians were true to their sources even down to their tone, with no thought as to the dissonant results. Instead, we can view kings as "types of moral life" in addition to the prophets.[24] In the Iranian context, the mytho-historical kings provide a moral example that other rulers should follow. Their stories are didactic tales—lessons to be drawn from those kings who either obey or disobey God or in disobeying God do not heed the warnings of prophets. The first men-kings are obedient to God, rule justly and institute justice, and promise the people to care for their well-being. All of the first men-kings deliver on their promises to God and the people until Jamshid, much like Pharoah, who states, "Council, I know of no other God of yours but me (Qur'an 28: 38),"[25] and forgets that it is through the beneficence of God that he and his people live eternally and without hardship. The lesson, here, is not only that Jamshid loses the divine aura and his kingship, but also that society turns into a calamitous chaos and the kingship is weakened. Thus Jamshid is killed and the kingship is usurped by the tyrannical Zahhak, who, much like his Avestan counterpart, attempts to rid the world of men by feeding their brains to the serpents on his shoulders. And as Tabari makes clear, the damage sustained is immense: "According to Habib ibn Aws no harm was done by Pharoah ... like that which al-Dahhak committed in his

[22]While it is beyond the scope of this paper to discuss the problematic nature of Firdausi's sources, it should be stated that I see no reason to assume that Firdausi was not aware of either Bal'ami or Tabari's works and, furthermore, believe that he had access to them in addition to other texts and oral sources. On the question of the portrayal of Jamshid, see also M. N. Bogolyubov, "Jamshid in the *Shahnama* and Yima in Zarathustra's *Yasna* 32," in *Shahnama Studies* I, ed. by C. Melville, *Pembroke Papers*, 5 (2006): 41–48.

[23]The exceptions to this are the founding king of the Sasanian Empire, Ardashir, and the king who would become the preeminent representative of just kingship in poetry and works belonging to the popular ethics and mirror-for-princes genres, Anushirvan the Just (r. 531–79 AD).

[24]See Dabiri, "The Origins," 121.

[25]Khalidi, *Arabic Historical Thought*, 11.

attack against the world."[26] Tabari does not hesitate to offer reports that compare the worst of Iranian kings with the worst of Qur'anic kings, just as he little hesitated to present reports that equate the best of Iranian kings to the first prophets.

The last Sasanian kings, meanwhile, are represented as weak and corrupt, since they were more concerned with succession, warfare and power than they were with the good of the people over whom they reigned. Accordingly, there would not be another illegitimate tyrant to come in their place this time. Instead, the Muslim army approaches the Iranian general, Rustam (or in some narratives the king himself), in an attempt to convert the Sasanians to Islam just as Moses had come to Pharoah. However, the Sasanian king and his general, like Pharoah, are full of pride and respond with contempt, and they do not yield to the call to Islam. With their contempt, the king and his general prove that their corruption is at its apogee, the consequence of which is that the king and his army suffer the same end as Pharoah—defeat and humiliation before the might of God, His prophet and deputy on earth, and his army.

Such parallels between the Sasanians' refusal to accept the call to Islam and Pharoah's refusal to accept God could not have been lost on Tabari and the conquest historians, who devoted a considerable amount of space to the story. In addition to equating the earlier Iranian king Zahhak with Pharoah, Tabari's work is driven by the overall theme on the nature of kings:

> Our intention in this work is to record . . . the history of mighty kings, both those who disobeyed and those who obeyed God . . . Let us now turn to the mention of the first to be given dominion and blessings by God who then showed ingratitude, denied and rebelled against God and waxed proud. God then withdrew His blessings . . . and brought him low;[27]

and on the relationship between kings and prophets. In the *Ta'rikh*, the first men-kings are inseparable from the ancient Qur'anic prophets because of their good deeds, which benefit humanity. When the kings can no longer be equated with prophets and their roles are no longer interchangeable, the fraught relationship between the two over the stewardship of the people is highlighted.

Just rulership is also a pervasive theme in Bal'ami's *Tarikh* and Firdausi's *Shahnama*. However, Bal'ami's treatment of Jamshid's fall from grace and Zahhak's rise to power is reformulated to fit a Perso-Islamic ideal of just kingship, while Firdausi's version retains the solely Iranian mythos. In Bal'ami's *Tarikh*, the role of the vizier takes on new importance for the greatness of Jamshid's reign. In fact, Bal'ami's *Tarikh* gives a new cause for celebrating *Nauruz*: Jamshid, having accomplished so much for the greater good, turns to

[26]Tabari, *Ta'rikh*, 201; the translation by William M. Brinner, *The History of al-Tabari. Volume 2, Prophets and Patriarchs* (Albany, 1987), 1, gives a much blander view of Zahhak's "accomplishments."

[27]Khalidi, *Arabic Historical Thought*, 79.

his viziers for advice on what else remains to be done to benefit humanity. His viziers advise him that he should establish a court of justice.[28] He agrees and, after setting up this new court, the people celebrate and call the auspicious day *Nauruz*, a new day. Soon after this, Jamshid is sitting *alone without his viziers*. A being, who claims to be an angel come from Heaven (but who is in actuality the fallen angel, Satan), suddenly materializes before the king and advises him:

> "If you had been one of Adam's children, you too would have become sick and died. You are the God of the Earth and the Heavens and you do not recognize yourself. You were in Heaven and you created this world. In Heaven you set aright the operations and then you came to Earth to set in order the system and bring justice. [You were to] then return to Heaven, but now you have forgotten yourself. I am one of your Angels and you have a lot of prerogatives over me. I have come to make you aware ... You brought justice to these people. Command them to worship you and whoever obeys reward them and whoever disobeys burn them."[29]

And since "it is a peculiarly Satanic activity to seduce man from the recollection of God into spiritual blindness and oblivion, as if the cosmic struggle between good and evil is fought over man's memory,"[30] Bal'ami's *Tarikh* holds the devil culpable for Jamshid's epistemological confusion. Jamshid forgets the knowledge that he and his viziers *together* established a court of justice for the benefit of humanity and he forgets that he is obedient to God and beholden by his promises to the people. He forgets all this to believe the devil's insinuation that *he is* God. The devil then advises him to burn those who disobey (the most important of whom would be the priests and elders who try to convince the king that he is not God).

In Firdausi's *Shahnama*, Jamshid has no scapegoat in the devil. Jamshid takes a good look around him and is more than pleased by his accomplishments. *Nauruz* is not the celebration of the institute of justice, rather it is the celebration of his flight into the air on a bejeweled skiff tied onto the backs of demons. So pleased is he with his technological advancements and the peace his subjects enjoy, that:

Through worldliness, that king who knew God
turned away from God and became ungrateful;
He summoned the nobles from the army;
what words he spoke to them!
He spoke to the great elders like this:
"I know no other than myself in this world,

[28]Bal'ami even uses a few key terms from the proceedings at Abbasid courts.

[29]Abu 'Ali Muhammad ibn Muhammad Bal'ami, *Tarikh-i Bal'ami*, ed. by Muhammad Taqi Bahar (Tehran, 2003), 89.

[30]Khalidi, *Arabic Historical Thought*, 12.

I have brought skills into the world,
the throne of kingship has seen none renowned as I.
I adorned the world with goodness,
the world has become as I desired.
Sleeping, eating, and your peace are due to me,
your very clothes and fulfilled desires are due to me.
Greatness, the diadem, and kingship are mine;
who would say any other than me is king?
**With remedies and treatments the world was righted,*
death and dying were diminished for us. . .
Who else besides me has removed death?
If there be a king on earth, enough—
Due to me your bodies have soul and mind,
He who does [not make a] pledge to me is Ahriman
If you recognize that I have done all this,
*I must be called Creator of the World."**
All the mobads dropped their heads.
No one dared ask how and why.
When he uttered these words, the divine farr
left and the world was full of chattering.[31]

No advisors come forward to warn Jamshid of his errors; the *mobads* (priests) and the elders are peculiarly speechless and even hapless in the face of Jamshid's surprising and anathematic speech. The devil plays no role in Jamshid's epistemological crisis. All on his own, Jamshid forgets God, he forgets himself and his place, he forgets his duty to the institute of kingship, and oppresses the people by demanding they worship him as God. However, while the devil has no influence on Jamshid, he does have significant influence on the young man born from a good reputable family, Bivarasp, whom the devil tricks and corrupts into becoming Zahhak, the tyrannical destroyer of humanity.

The significance of the fact that, unlike Bal'ami's version, the devil concentrates his efforts on Bivarasp is that it follows the solely Iranian context of Zahhak's role as a destroyer of humanity. It will be recalled that Zahhak's Avestan counterpart is Azhi Dahaka, who in a self-defeating manner supplicates the good deities for dominion *in order to* rid the world of mankind. The desire to depopulate the world, as mentioned previously, is a peculiarly Ahrimanic preoccupation and it is the antithesis of the successful supplication by the good rulers of the *Avesta*. According to the Zoroastrian religion, humans are among many in the army of God in the cosmic battle against Ahriman and his (*mis*)creations, among whom stands Azhi Dahaka. By retaining Satan/Ahriman as the one

[31] Abu al-Qasim Firdausi [Ferdowsi], *The Shahnameh*, ed. by Dj. Khaleghi-Motlagh (Tehran, 2006), 1: 44–45, ll. 62–70; the verses between asterisks are variants recorded in note 9. (All references to the *Shahnama* are from the Khaleghi-Motlagh edition.)

responsible for Bivarasp's corruption (and not Jamshid's), Firdausi's *Shahnama* offers an account closely resembling the older versions of Jamshid's fall.

By the time the Ghaznavids seized control of the Samanid kingdom, the history of Iranians as Muslims was already well established by Bal'ami's authoritative text. In addition, Mahmud had other specific interests in Persian literature and history: The stories of the Persian legendary kings, retold by storytellers, served to entertain the Sultan during feasts and in the evenings.[32] Likewise, Persian poetry doubtlessly also served to entertain Sultan Mahmud and provided a ripe medium for promoting his own rulership, as is evidenced by the innumerable encomiastic poems dedicated to him by his own court poets, who recorded his physical prowess and military feats and conquests. This suggests that as a history, the *Shahnama* would have held little interest for the Sultan, who was entertained on a nightly basis with purportedly similar stories regarding the same kings. Nor would it have held interest for him as poetry, since court poetry was relegated to the arena of eulogies in which military deeds were recorded for posterity.[33] Furthermore, Persian history served the Sultan as an alternative, but no less propagandizing, agenda to the poetry he supported. Mahmud was sometimes attributed a genealogy that linked him back to the Sasanian kings, which on the one hand helped legitimize his rulership, while on the other hand kept him on a par with the rulers of the other preceding and contemporary Iranian dynasties across the Islamic lands who also traced their lineages back to the Sasanians or their cohorts, the Parthians (through Bahram Chubin).[34] Furthermore, the *Shahnama*, which ends at the Islamic conquests, does not chronologically link Mahmud to the Sasanians and so seemingly separates him from Iranian history. Even the praise to Mahmud that recurs throughout the *Shahnama* testifies to the fact that the *Shahnama* does not weave the sultan into its narrative, rather the lines in praise of the Sultan are blatantly juxtaposed and sidelined to the main narrative of pre-Islamic Iranian history.[35]

[32]See J. T. P. de Bruijn, "Poets and Minstrels in Early Persian Literature," in *Transition Periods in Iranian History: Actes du Symposium de Fribourg-en-Brisgau (22–24 Mai 1985), Studia Iranica Cahier*, 5 (Paris, 1987), 15–23, and Yamamoto, *The Oral Background*, 58.

[33]With the exception of the Samanids, who patronized poets like Rudaki, who composed poems on a wide variety of subject matter.

[34]C. E. Bosworth, "The Heritage of Rulership in Early Islamic Iran and the Search for Dynastic Connections with the Past," *Iranian Studies*, 11 (1978): 18, 25–26. Mahmud's claims to connections with the Iranian past were faint. By contrast, the Samanids traced their lineage to Bahram Chubin. For the complex relationship between the Parthians and the Sasanians, refer to Parvaneh Pourshariati, *Decline and Fall of the Sasanian Empire: The Sasanian–Parthian Confederacy and the Arab Conquest of Iran* (New York, 2008), 56–140, 394 and see also p. 446 for possible connections between texts on Bahram Chubin's revolt and the Buyids. Refer also to Shahbazi, *Ferdowsī*, 84.

[35]The primary references to Mahmud frame the *Shahnama*. In the beginning, the verses appear before the main story begins and after the sections in praise of the prophet and the stories of Abu Mansur and Daqiqi. Immediately after the *Shahnama* ends with the defeat of the Iranians, Firdausi praises Mahmud, *Shahnama*, 8: 487, l. 888. The following noted verses are a sample of the references to the Sultan in the *Shahnama*, 5: 220, ll. 19–20, which appear at the end of Gushtasp's story; 5: 439,

Meisami aptly states that the tastes of the courts were changing by the time Firdausi completed the *Shahnama*, but attributes the Sultan's cool reception of the epic to the fact that the "*Shāhnāma* was something of an anomaly: not quite literature and not quite history."[36] However, the preceding histories, much like the *Shahnama*, do not shy away from incorporating the mythical and the fantastical (in regard to both mythical and historical kings),[37] since the boundaries between history and literature had not been solidified or codified.[38] Furthermore, Tabari, Dinavari, their predecessors and their contemporaries also employed narrative techniques similar to those of storytelling. This latter was, in part, unavoidable due to the fact that these annalistic histories were based on transmitted reports (which in the case of the stories of the Iranian mytho-historical kings, were evolutions from Avestan hymns that served a dual function as ethical tales of the deeds of the first men). However, when the *Shahnama*'s thematic concerns and structure are compared with that of the preceding histories we see that the *Shahnama* differs from them considerably. The *Shahnama* is unconcerned with Iranian history in its new Islamic context and uninterested in the intertwined genealogies of the Qur'anic prophets and Iranian kings. It treats ideals of kingship in a solely Iranian context. Furthermore, many of the histories that preceded the *Shahnama* were annalistic in structure, while the epic reads much like a dynastic history; according to the *Shahnama*, Iranian lineage is a hereditary, continuous, and relatively uninterrupted succession of Iranian kings from mytho-historical times to Alexander the Great (who is given an Iranian princess as a mother) and the Sasanians, which is brought to a drastic and melancholy end by the Arab conquests. Meanwhile, though dynastic histories were to become the new frontier in Persian historiography, the ones that were produced by the Ghaznavid courts soon after the *Shahnama* was completed, such as Baihaqi's *Tarikh-i Baihaqi* and Ibn Funduq's *Tarikh-i Baihaq*, are primarily uninterested in Iran's ancient past and avoid the mythical and the fantastical.[39] Gardizi's *Zayn al-Akhbar*, which gives a "brief and cursory" account "of the

ll. 7–8, which is a dedication to the sultan appearing before Rustam and Shaghad's story; 5: 515, ll. 1–6, which is a eulogy to the Sultan at the beginning of Darab's story; 6: 135–37, ll. 23–63, which is a eulogy to the Sultan at the beginning of the Ashkaniyan's story; 7: 409, l. 3862 and 7: 409 (footnote 17), which appear at the beginning and the end of Nushiravan's letter to Hurmuzd respectively. Each of these references frame the individual story (either by beginning with a praise/reference to Mahmud or ending with one).

[36]Julie Scott Meisami, *Persian Historiography to the End of the Twelfth Century* (Edinburgh, 1999), 53.

[37]Ibn Ishaq and Tabari usually add the line "God knows best" when the veracity of a story is in doubt.

[38]In fact, the texts that deal with the mythical and fantastical were met with suspicion by certain groups and rejected outright as reliable histories by many later historians. See Khalidi's *Arabic Historical Thought* for more on the development of historical narratives in general.

[39]Meisami, *Persian Historiography*, 58. See also Marilyn Robinson Waldman, *Toward a Theory of Historical Narrative: A Case Study in Perso-Islamicate Historiography* (Columbus, OH, 1980), 47, on Baihaqi and who he perceived his audience to be, what he expected his audience to know, and

Pre-Islamic Persian monarchs,"[40] has also been characterized as being uninterested in the fantastical elements of ancient Iranian history.[41] Tha'alibi's *Ghurar al-Muluk al-Furs*,[42] which was commissioned by the Sultan's son and heir, Mas'ud, and which was completed within a few decades after the *Shahnama*, treats the same subject matter as the *Shahnama* with a very similar structure and format. However, unlike Firdausi's epic, it places emphasis (albeit to a much more limited extent than previous histories) on the intertwined Qur'anic–Iranian genealogies and eliminates elements of the fantastical in the section dealing with the historical kings. When the aforementioned considerations are taken together, we can appreciate how the *Shahnama* is an "anomaly" as a work of history (when compared to and contextualized with the works preceding it and immediately succeeding it) rather than "not quite literature and not quite history."

Taking the following statement from Herder: "A people will wherever possible invent its drama according to its own history, its own spirit of the times, customs, opinions, language ... traditions, and inclinations,"[43] we should consider these histories from a panoptic view. When we do, different patterns of historiography for different geographic regions emerge: in Baghdad, Ibn Ishaq, Tabari,[44] and their teachers and pupils were collecting data and writing; in Tus, Firdausi and presumably Abu Mansur were writing the history of Iranians outside its Islamic context; in Bukhara, the Samanids were sponsoring the first truly Perso-Islamic history;[45] and in Ghazni,[46] Sultan Mahmud and his son

what he aimed to provide by way of aim and content. See also note 46 below for more on the histories produced during the later Ghaznavid and Saljuq periods.

[40]Meisami, *Persian Historiography*, 69.

[41]Meisami states, "[Gardizi] has a clear aversion to the sort of fantastic and legendary elements for which the *Shāhnāma* was criticised"; ibid., 69.

[42]The *Ghurar* was composed in Arabic and was commissioned by Mas'ud for his own legitimating purposes.

[43]Johann Gottfried von Herder, *Against Pure Reason: Writings on Religion, Language, and History*, trans. and ed. by Marcia Bunge (Minneapolis, 1993), 151.

[44]Though both these scholars were well traveled and collected their data in different cities, their base was Baghdad, among the many other scholars of the eighth and ninth centuries.

[45]Here the issue of Daqiqi is slightly problematic since he was most probably born in Tus but lived at the Samanid court in Balkh as a court poet. He was commissioned by Nuh ibn Mansur (r. 975–97 AD) to compose a verse *Shahnama*. However, it cannot be ascertained what the final content of the epic would have been, since only 1000 of his lines were incorporated by Firdausi into his own version. However, Khaleghi-Motlagh, "Daqīqī," *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, 6: 662b, supposes that "Daqīqī chose to begin his versification of the text, not from the beginning, but from the accession of Goštāsp ... Before Ferdowsī the major heroes of the Iranian national epics were Goštāsp and Esfandīār, not Rostam" (http://www.iranica.com/newsite (last accessed 12/09/09)). If so, Firdausi's *Shahnama* appears to differ significantly from what the Samanids had commissioned.

[46]Other histories written during the Ghaznavid period such as the *Tarikh-i Sistan* still treat Iran's pre-Islamic past, although cursorily. The *Tarikh-i Sistan* primarily does so to the extent that it dealt with Sistan's glory and Sistan's perceived foreknowledge and acceptance of Islam. Refer to Meisami, *Persian Historiography*, 108–111 for more information and refer to the fourth chapter, "Historiography of the Saljūq Period," for a discussion on the themes and structures of the late

Mas'ud sponsored military history through encomiastic poems,[47] and Iranian history in Arabic respectively for legitimating purposes.[48] Altogether these histories are a reflection of the multifaceted cultural concerns and affairs of each region. The *Shahnama* was not initially well received *in general* because, as a history, it differs in aim, content, and execution from the histories that preceded it and immediately succeeded it in the Samanid and Ghaznavid courts respectively.[49]

As poetry, the *Shahnama* also significantly differs from what preceded and succeeded it. Eulogies and lampoons, both of which were predominantly composed in Arabic, were the two most common types of poems composed in the eighth to the tenth century even in the eastern Islamic regions where the predominant languages were Iranian languages.[50] The Saffarids (AD 861–1003) in southeastern Iran were the first to sponsor Persian poems of varied topics at their courts and later the Samanids and their viziers sponsored original poems such as *ghazals* and *qasidas* on a wide variety of topics, from death and old age to religion and mysticism, and commissioned poetic adaptations of other literary works. The Ghaznavids (in particular Mahmud) sponsored encomiastic poems regarding military feats as Persian poetry in general was branching out to include festival poems, epigrams, lampoons, and poems on love and nature.

Within a few short decades after Firdausi's *Shahnama* was completed, other poets were inspired by his rendition of heroic exploits and kingly deeds in verse. The focus of epics was narrowed and relegated to one romantic hero from a specific region and time. More often than not, the eleventh- and early twelfth-century epic poets appropriated the historical figures Firdausi either dealt with very little, or those they felt could be rendered differently. This was done not just to avoid recreating and emulating the *Shahnama* (as poets like Nizami, Gurgani, and Asadi state in the prologues of their epics), but also as tastes changed from the universal/dynastic, as embodied by the *Shahnama*'s overarching history of Iranians, to the particular. Interestingly, the development of these epics from the universal/dynastic to the particular, by assimilating and appropriating the material or theme of a predecessor, coincided with the

eleventh and twelfth-century histories such as the *Mujmal al-Tawarikh* and the *Farsnama*, which deal with pre-Islamic Iranian history in other contexts.

[47]See Waldman, *Theory of Historical Narrative*, 63, for a discussion on the use of encomiastic poems as a medium for military history.

[48]The scope of the article is limited to the specific aforementioned histories. More research, however, is needed on the intellectual concerns and the context of the development of Iranian historiography (I use the term Iranian historiography for histories that deal with Iranian history irrespective of language used).

[49]The *Abu Mansuri Shahnama* is excluded from discussion here since, besides the Preface, which was appended to an early copy of Firdausi's *Shahnama*, the text is no longer extant. Therefore, any discussion on the topic of what the text may or may not have included or how similar it was in structure, aim, and content to the other histories produced around the same time period is too speculative by nature.

[50]Azartash Azarnush, *Chalish Miyan-i Farsi va 'Arabi dar Sadaha-yi Nukhust* (Tehran, 2006).

development of the aforementioned histories from the universal to the particular in a similar manner. As interest in history grew less about the universal significance of the Muslim community, or the Iranian–Muslim community for that matter, and their role in the greater Judeo-Christian tradition, and more about specific dynasties, sultans, and localities, epics became focused on particular king-heroes, popular local religious figures, and even on the pursuit of the divine.[51] These later epics not only shifted the thematic architecture of epics, they also provided a new medium for representing history and its pervasive theme: just kingship.

The *Shahnama*, as a unique middle point between histories composed in prose and verse, was the first significant break in the tenacious hold prose had over historical narratives. The epic form allowed for greater thematic freedom and became the appropriate forum for attributing fantastical feats to historical figures: A trusted nurse uses talismans to keep a decrepit old king from taking his disgusted young virgin-bride, Vis, who is in love with the king's younger brother, Ramin.[52] Seven beauties living in seven pavilions regale Bahram Gur with seven different splendid yet spiritual stories,[53] while Alexander the Great traverses dark lands in search of the Spring of Life with the mythical Khizr as his guide.[54] As epics became less and less bound by the constraints of historical accuracy while dealing with historical figures, and as histories moved away from the fantastical, the demarcating line between history and literature was being drawn. This is especially reflected in the epics of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, which became the chosen medium for portraying Sufism through anecdotes (which had heretofore been used in the popular ethics and mirror-for-princes genres). The paradigmatic epics of this latter type are 'Attar's *Mantiq al-Tair* and Rumi's *Masnavi*, where the human and the divine or historical and mythical are integrated through thematically interconnected series of moralizing anecdotes into a tightly woven narrative in verse.[55]

[51]For instance, Gurgani's *Vis va Ramin*, Asadi Tusi's *Garshaspnama*, Nizami's *Khusrau va Shirin*, *Layli va Majnun*, *Haft Paikar* for the first group; the *Alinama*, Abu Tahir al-Tartusi's *Abu Muslimnama* for the second group; and Sana'i's *Hadiqat al-Haqiqa*, Nizami's *Makhzan al-Asrar*, and 'Attar's *Mantiq al-Tair* and *Ilahinama* for the third.

[52]See Gurgani, *Vis va Ramin*, ed. by Muhammad Raushan (Tehran, 1999). The assumption that the story is based on historical figures is a reflection of the beliefs of the poets, historians, and biographers of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries who mention the romance. See V. Minorsky, "*Vīs u Rāmīn*, a Parthian Romance," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*, 11, no. 4 (1946): 741–742.

[53]See Nizami, "Haft Paikar," in *Kulliyat-i Nizami Ganjavi*: *Mutabiq-i Nuskha-yi Vahid Dastgirdi*, ed. by Parviz Baba'i (Tehran, 1999).

[54]See Nizami, "Iskandarnama," in ibid.

[55]For more on anecdotes and "counterhistories" in new historicism, see Catherine Gallagher and Stephen Greenblatt, *Practicing New Historicism* (Chicago, 2000), 49–54. Also see Dabiri, "The Origins," chapter 3, for a discussion of the relationship between the *Mantiq al-Tair* and preceding epics through historiography and the theme of just kingship. For 'Attar's *Ilahinama*, see also trans. J. A. Boyle, *The Ilāhī-nāma or Book of God* (Manchester, 1976).

Familiar with these developments in the long narrative poem and recognizing that they all stemmed from or were inspired by the *Shahnama* for the breadth of its subject matter and the psychological depth with which its kings and heroes are portrayed, biographers of poets were left to reconcile their admiration for Firdausi and his *Shahnama* with its initial rejection. These biographers, with no recourse to rectify the past, constructed and perpetuated the story of the camels loaded with promised riches from a regretful Mahmud entering the front gate of the city too late as Firdausi had already died embittered about the reception of his work. They superimposed their own regret over Firdausi's treatment onto Sultan Mahmud, who, according to their interpretations, denied the poet the fame and glory he deserved in his lifetime by virtue of what they presented as his lack of interest.